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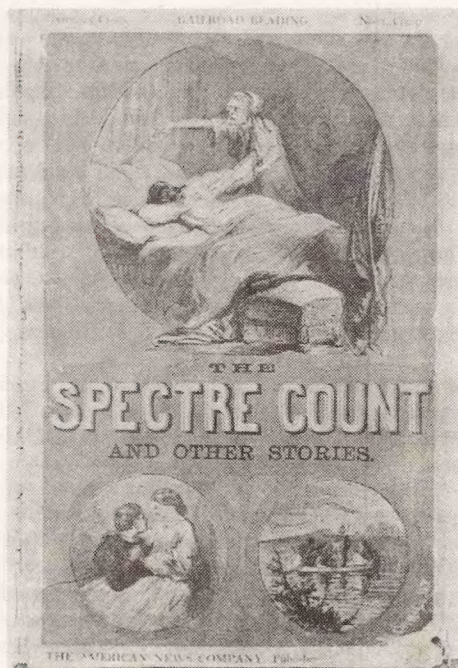
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## Edward Stratemeyer's Appeal To Contemporary Young Readers

By Peter C. Walther



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#### RAILROAD READING

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## Edward Stratemeyer's Appeal To Contemporary Young Readers

By Peter C. Walther

Dedicated to Jody Clark—a very discriminating reader.

Some months ago I conceived the idea of testing Stratemeyer's popularity among the current young reading public. Unaware of the final outcome, my working hypothesis was "Does Edward Stratemeyer Appeal to Today's Young Readers?" But when the project fairly became underway I was persuaded by the results to entitle this article as it now appears. Note the exclusion of the obtrusive question mark!

It was my contention that Stratemeyer could very well be in the heart and mind of the boys of today; so I conducted a survey to obtain proof. As a teacher in one of the local elementary schools I felt attuned to the habits and tastes of today's juvenile readers. Our library stocks about a dozen or so Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew titles, as well as a Bobbsey Twins story, but next to that there is no other series book, past or present, for the student to choose. (Let me however parenthetically remark that I consider the school indeed fortunate to include the Dixon and Keene volumes on its shelf; countless hundreds developed a reading interest from those stories.) Knowing how popular Stratemeyer was in his day and how popular he is today with the *cognoscenti* I chose four "typical" books and picked some students to read them. Upon completion of each story they filled out an evaluation form (a sample of which is shown at the end of the article). Of necessity I did choose bright students and good readers, so the results of my experiment might be considered biased by some and one-sided by others. Logically it was useless to do otherwise, however, because some students wouldn't have read anyway, whether it was Stratemeyer, Laura Ingalls Wilder, comic books, or even cereal boxes. The participating students were all sixth graders: Brian, Albert, and Joseph read all four books, while Scott, Jeffrey, Andy, and Jason read one apiece.

Before stating the results I wish to mention the stories I chose and the reasons for my choice. Many of today's older generation remember Stratemeyer for his "Rover Boys Series," so I picked two Winfield titles, not only because of their once immense popularity but also due to the ever-celebrated "boarding school—adventure—back to boarding school" plot, *The Rover Boys on the Ocean* (C. 1899 by The Mershon Company and Vol. 2 of "The First Rover Boys Series," hereafter abbreviated "Rover") and *The Putnam Hall Rebellion* (C. 1909 by Edward Stratemeyer and Vol. 4 of "The Putnam Hall Series," hereafter abbreviated "Putnam.") The other two stories were titles from the Lee and Shepard publishing house which appeared under the author's own name and not under any pseudonym: *Reuben Stone's Discovery* (C.

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1895 by The Merriam Company and Vol. 2 of "The Ship and Shore Series" but serialized in *Argosy* from July-September 1892, hereafter abbreviated "Reuben") and *At the Fall of Port Arthur*, showing the writer as historian (C. 1905 by Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Company and Vol. 3 of "The Soldiers of Fortune Series," hereafter abbreviated "Fall.") I reasoned this might well reflect a representative selection of Stratemeyer's complete output. The boys were quite excited with the idea and after distributing the books I waited patiently for some feedback, positive or otherwise.

When all the volumes had been read and the evaluation forms filled out the results proved without a doubt that the Stratemeyer stories were an unqualified success. The students were asked to rate each of the books: Poor—Fair—Good—Very Good—Excellent. Ninety per-cent were judged "Excellent" while one Very Good and one Good showed up. Then each was asked to indicate his favorite section of the book. Answers were varied, naturally, and purely subjective but there was some overlapping. The battle scenes in "Fall" were especially popular as was the episode of the cadets' running away in "Putnam," (does this reflect any latent desires on the part of the readers?) Many of the appealing characters were the heroes: Dick, Tom, and Sam Rover as well as Stuffer, Pepper, and numerous other Putnam Cadets, but my personal opinion always had been that the villains were far more memorable. Albert and I think alike for he was the only one to pinpoint Mumps and Josiah Crabtree as favorite characters. Some of the other boys preferred Norton Bixby or Reff Ritter, but for the most part they enjoyed seeing the bad guys receive their deserved come-uppance; hero worship is not dead after all, possibly only misplaced in today's society. (I always hoped that Crabtree and Mrs. Stanhope would make a match of it, but obviously Stratemeyer had other ideas.)

Question four read: "Was there something about the book that you didn't enjoy? Explain." Brian had nothing bad to say about any of them and neither did Joseph. Albert brought out a good point when he indicated that the word "er" was used to an excessive degree in "Putnam." After a while it . . . er . . . could become . . . er . . . tiresome. The most original remark though came from Jason when he stated that in "Rover" he enjoyed the part where Tom and Sam tease Farmer Fox over the apple-stealing incident "because I don't like stealing." Who can refute that? Ninety-four percent of the tabulations showed that the books interested the readers continuously from start to finish, and the only reasons given for abandoning the pursuit at all were either to do chores, eat supper, or go to bed! Some books were even read in one day (don't forget: these are sixth graders.) After reading "Rover" Brian thought that Stratemeyer strayed from the plot once in a while. Although the robbery of the Brokerage Firm Rush & Wilder is satisfactorily explained at the arrest of Arnold Baxter and cronies in the last chapter, the chase proper after Dora Stanhope (upon which depends the outcome of the tale) doesn't commence until page 125, precisely halfway through the book. Every one of the boys recommended the stories whole-heartedly to their friends, due to the exciting incidents and constant level of interest. I also asked them whether they would like to read other books in the same series. Once again I received an enthusiastic response (one-hundred per-cent); Stratemeyer's bait held under the greedy eyes of his readers in 1900 becomes just as valid in 1978. Once hooked it is almost impossible to disregard what happens later on to the characters in question. Scott's answer after reading "Reuben" is notable: "Yes, if they were exciting like this one." Other Stratemeyer volumes will be made available to the boys upon request; indeed some have already booked certain titles.



After the forms were completed Brian, Albert, and Joseph each answered three separate but specific questions. The first one related to the individual book that had been completed. I was interested to know if the boys had learned any historical data pertaining to the Russo-Japanese War from "Fall." They wrote that they learned something about Admiral Togo as well as becoming acquainted with the layout of the deck of a war vessel. Albert was intrigued with the Japanese war cry: "Bonzai!" As Stratemeyer himself states in the Preface to *The Campaign of the Jungle* (C. 1900 by Lee and Shepard and Vol. 5 of "The Old Glory Series"): "As in the previous volumes of this series, the author has endeavored to be as accurate, historically, as possible, and for this reason has examined the reports of the officers high in command, as well as listened to many tales related by the returning soldiers themselves. It is therefore hoped that if any errors have crept in they may not be of sufficient magnitude to hurt the general usefulness of the work from an historical standpoint." We have no basis of fact to assume that his later writing habits were any different or less exacting. After "Rover" was read I wanted to know whether "the chase after Dora Stanhope was exciting and well told: Why or why not?" They all thought the chase was most engrossing: it even made Jason "tingel" (sic). Joseph really scored a home-run when he stated that Stratemeyer approached the plot from different angles: the Rover Boys' pursuit vs. Dora's abduction and Baxter's escape. I always admired the author for his craft in handling cross-forms: *The Rover Boys on the Great Lakes* is a better example, but in this instance we have it on the authority of an eleven-year old who read the volume not knowing what to expect. "Putnam" on the other hand is a story primarily of character and situation rather than detailed plot, so without giving away any preconceived notions I wondered which they enjoyed more: the plot or the development of the characters. The boys' opinion was that what happened to them and their interaction with other characters (i.e. the specific incidents: the starching and blueing and the many other pranks, the "riot" in the mess hall, the camping out in the woods) took precedence in interest over the actual end results. Captivating characters can certainly make a book come alive: doesn't Stratemeyer show us that what a person IS can be just as significant as what he DOES? Since "Reuben" was written in the first person my question was: "Did that bother you? Were you able to sympathize with Reuben throughout the story?" They all answered affirmatively and emotions ranged from sadness, concern, and neglect to happiness. The first person bothered no one: Joseph went so far as to say that it even made it more interesting! After answering that first question I wanted them to list, in order of preference, the four books. Before doing this however they were quick to aver that a story listed fourth did not necessarily reflect their disinterest in it. The unanimous favorite was "Putnam," (interestingly enough that would have been my last choice). "Fall" came up a close second, with the other two alternately taking second, third, and fourth places.

My final question I will state in full: "Do you feel that the boys of today would enjoy reading these and other books by Edward Stratemeyer? Explain." This time I will risk the author's prerogative of letting the answers speak for themselves, only altering the punctuation when the meaning is not clear:

Albert: "Yes, because they have adventure on almost every page so you want to keep reading. Like *Reuben Stone's Discovery*, that had people chasing each other almost all the time (which I liked.) *The Putnam Hall Rebellion* had the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' which is nice."



Joseph: "I think that they would enjoy reading about Stratemeyer's books because in some cases he puts 'I' instead of another person's name, and it makes it as if you are there. Also I liked how he had people at about the age of sixteen and how he varied the characters and the locale." (My quotes.)

Brian: "Yes, because these books are about young men and boys. And some of the books would fit right in with a boy's own kind of book, that he would read most of the time (anyway). For example, if he read adventure books like **Tom Sawyer** and **Huck Finn**, then he would very much like to read Stratemeyer's collection of books."

This article has tried to show that just because an author's work is no longer in print the fact does not necessarily follow that it lacks relevance or ability to give pleasure to the modern reader. Edward Stratemeyer was my example: I consider him not only an entertaining writer but an accurate historian as well. My contention is that Stratemeyer can be enjoyed by the juvenile reading public just as he was in the early decades of this century, and I think my survey has at least partially supported my belief. Mr. Gilbert Westgard has indicated to the members of "The Horatio Alger Society" his intention to reprint **Victor Horton's Idea**: an excellent enterprise and one long overdue, especially since the story never appeared in hard cover. No one is expecting an adventuresome publisher to end up in the red due to certain printing ventures, but what a pity that many of the books read and enjoyed by millions just one or two generations ago are now either memories or obscure footnotes. Except for the collectors who currently enjoy reading these boys books there are many youngsters who are not even aware of the rich quantity of unavailable reading matter. "Old" is not equated with "Passé." Boys will give any unfamiliar book a fighting chance, and Stratemeyer proved that he can still be a cult figure in 1978. His books are certainly due for a re-appraisal and re-evaluation. Let the youth of today be permitted to enjoy them, to have the books once more made available to them, and to read them as they will. We do not need to agree with the author of a recent article who pigeon-holed Stratemeyer as "mental pabulum," "with no redeeming literary or social value." Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of discriminating readers old and young alike (as this survey attests) would like to see the classic Stratemeyers back in print. Walk into almost any bookstore and you will find much more objectionable reading matter than was ever dreamed of when "The Rover Boys" first saw the light of day.

Let's put Stratemeyer back where he belongs: in the hands of the young reading public rather than exclusively on the collector's bookshelf.

#### Evaluation sheet for Edward Stratemeyer project

Your name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Title of book \_\_\_\_\_

How would you rate this book?

POOR              FAIR              GOOD              VERY GOOD              EXCELLENT

What part of the book did you like the most?

Were there any characters in the story that you particularly enjoyed reading about?

Was there something about the book that you didn't enjoy? Explain.

Did this book continually interest you from the first page to the last, or were there times when you wanted to put the book down because of disinterest?

Would you recommend this story to your friends?

(See me for this question. Answer on reverse.)

At some future time would you like to read some more books in the same series?



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# CONTENTS and INDEX OF MAJOR SUBJECTS

January 1976—December 1978

Numbers 517—534

- Adley, D. J. and W. O. G. Lofts  
Favorite Boyhood Characters on the  
British Screen, 525:66-70; 526:  
122-126
- Aldine Life and Adventure Library, by  
Denis R. Rogers, 533:97-108
- Aldine Publishing Co., 532:82-88
- Alger, Horatio, Jr. 525:58-65; 533:39
- Bales, Jack  
Newsboys' Lodging House Impetus  
for An Immortal, The, 521:116-122
- Bibliography of Hard Cover Boys  
Books by Harry K. Hudson, Changes  
to, 529:31-32; 531:78; 532:89-90
- Biographical Mysteries of George Al-  
fred Henty, by W. O. G. Lofts,  
524:44-48
- Books of William Heyliger, by Bob  
Chenu, 519:62-65
- Boys' Book First Editions, by Harry  
K. Hudson, 525:71-72
- Boys One At a Time Library, 533:99
- Brady's Champion Stories  
Illustration & Sketch, 521:105
- Brady's Mercury Stories  
Illustration & Sketch, 530:33  
List of Titles, 530:49
- Brady's Peoples Novelettes  
Illustration & Sketch, 527:97  
List of Titles, 520:115
- Buffalo Bill, Hero of Dime Novels,  
Poem by Col. Charles D. Randolph  
526:94
- Burt, A. L., Publisher, 524:26-43
- Carter, Arthur N.  
Movies Featuring Real and Fiction-  
al Characters Made Famous by  
Dime Novels, 520:91-95
- Carter, Nick, 517:22-25; 522:130-137;  
534:114-119
- Censorship and Early Adolescent Lit-  
erature, Stratemeyer, Mathiews and  
Comstock, by Ken Donelson, 534:  
119-121
- Charles Lamb's Forerunners of the  
Dime Novel, by J. E. Riehl, 532:  
109-110
- Checklist of Robert M. DeWitt Publi-  
cations by Edward T. LeBlanc,  
520:97
- Chenu, Julius R. (Bob)  
Books of William Heyliger, 519:62-  
65  
Garden City Publishing Company's  
Paperback Juveniles, 531:72-74  
Lawrenceville Series by Owen John-  
son, 517:11-12  
Magazine Serial and Book Relation-  
ships in Leo Edwards Books,  
534:122-124  
Optic Serials as Books, 518:50
- Chester Gard Mayo—An Appreciation  
by John T. Dizer, Jr., 530:48-49
- Comstock, Anthony, 534:119-121
- Cook, William Wallace, 518:34-45
- Cox, J. Randolph  
Diamond Dick, 523:2-8  
Dime Novel Reviews, The Coming  
of Dr. Quartz, 522:130-137  
Jesse James Sings Again, 523:20  
Nick Carter in the Movies, 534:114-  
119  
Nick Carter Stories, 517:22-25
- Craufurd, Ross  
Early Doughty—Master of Myster-  
ies and Wonder, The, 521:106-115  
Fred Fearnot Was There, 519:58-61
- Deutsch, James I.  
Jesse James in Dime Novels: Am-  
bivalence Towards an Outlaw  
Hero, 517:1-11
- DeWitt's Handsome Jack Series  
Illustration & Sketch, 526:77  
List of Titles, 526:92
- DeWitt's Jonathan Wild Series  
Illustration & Sketch, 517:1
- DeWitt's Romances  
Illustration & Sketch, 520:129  
List of Titles, 522:141



- DeWitt's Stories of the Sea  
Illustration & Sketch, 524:25  
List of Titles, 524:49
- DeWitt's Twenty-Five Cent Novels  
Illustration & Sketch, 529:1  
List of Titles, 529:30-31
- Diamond Dick, by J. Randolph Cox  
523:2-8
- Dime Novel Reviews—The Coming of  
Dr. Quartz, by J. Randolph Cox,  
522:130-137
- Displaying One's Collection, by Willis  
J. Potthoff, 518:46-49
- Dizer, John T., Jr.  
Chester Gard Mayo—An Apprecia-  
tion, 530:48-49
- Stratemeyer and Science Fiction,  
Part II. The Swifts, 520:74-90  
Street & Smith Box M58, 526:78-84
- Donelson, Ken  
Censorship and Early Adolescent  
Literature, Stratemeyer, Math-  
ews and Comstock, 534:119-121
- H. Irving Hancock, A Romanticized  
View of Sports and Boys, 522:  
138-141
- Horatio Alger, Jr. and Ragged Dick,  
525:58-65
- Early Doughty—Master of Mysteries  
and Wonders, by Ross Craufurd,  
521:106-115
- Early Publications of the Aldine  
Publishing Company, by Denis R.  
Rogers, 532:82-88
- Edwards, Leo, 534:122-124
- Ellis, Edward S., 524:26-43; 527:98-115
- Ellis for Beginners, by Denis R. Rog-  
ers, 529:2-20
- Favorite Boyhood Characters on the  
British Screen, by W. O. G. Lofts  
and D. J. Adley, 525:66-70; 528:  
122-126
- Fearnot, Fred, 519:58-61
- Frank Leslie's Popular Library  
Illustration & Sketch, 523:1
- Fred Fearnot Was There, by Ross  
Craufurd, 519:58-61
- Garden City Publishing Company's  
Paperback Juveniles, by Bob Chenu  
531:72-74
- H. Irving Hancock, A Romanticized  
View of Sports and Boys, by Ken  
Donelson, 522:138-141
- Half Century of the Hardy Boys; or,  
Clues to an Obscure Chronology  
by Robert V. Riordan, 530:34-47
- Hancock, H. Irving, 522:138-141
- Hardy Boys, 530:34-47
- Harris, Louise  
Who Wrote the Pledge of Allegi-  
ance? 528:127-130
- Henty Fame and Riches, by W. O. G.  
Lofts, 526:89-91
- Henty, George Alfred, 524:44-48
- Heyliger, William, 519:62-65
- Hilton's Prize Romances  
Illustration & Sketch, 534:113  
List of Titles, 534:125
- Home Library  
Illustration, 519:57
- Horatio Alger, Jr. and Ragged Dick,  
by Kenneth L. Donelson, 525:58-65
- Hudson, Harry K.  
Boys' Book First Editions, 525:71-2  
Changes to Bibliography of Hard  
Cover Boys' Books, 529:31-32;  
531:78; 532:89-90
- James, Jesse, 517:1-11; 523:20
- Jesse James in Dime Novels, Ambi-  
valence Towards An Outlaw Hero.  
by James I. Deutsch, 517:1-11
- Jesse James Sings Again, by J. Ran-  
dolph Cox, 523:20
- Johnson, Owen, 517:11-12
- Lamb, Charles, 533:109-110
- Lawrenceville Series by Owen John-  
son, by Bob Chenu, 517:11-12
- LeBlanc, Edward T.  
Checklist of Robert M. DeWitt  
Publications, 529:97
- Lofts, W. O. G.  
Biographical Mysteries of George  
Alfred Henty, The, 524:44-48
- Favorite Boyhood Characters on  
the British Screen, 525:66-70;  
528:122-126
- Henty Fame and Riches, The, 526:  
89-91
- Success and Failure, 523:9-12

- Lovell Complex, The, by Denis R. Rogers, 527:98-115
- Lovell, John W., 527:98-115
- Magazine Serial and Book Relationships in Leo Edwards Books, by Bob Chenu, 534:122-124
- Mathiews, Franklin K., 534:119-121
- Mayo, Chester Gard, 530:48-49
- Merriwell, Frank, 531:58-71
- Movies Featuring Real and Fictional Characters Made Famous By Dime Novels, by Arthur N. Carter, 520:91-95
- Newsboys' Lodging House Impetus for an Immortal, by Jack Bales, 521:116-122
- Nick Carter in the Movies, by J. Randolph Cox, 534:114-119
- Nick Carter Studies, by J. Randolph Cox, 517:22-25
- Nightside Library  
Illustration & Sketch, 520:73
- Oddities of Dime Novels Days, by Denis R. Rogers, 526:85-88
- Optic, Oliver, 517:28-29
- Optic Serials as Books, by J. A. Chenu 518:50
- Penny Dreadfuls, 523:9-12
- Peterson's Illuminated Stories  
Illustration & Sketch, 532:81  
List of Titles, 532:91
- Popular Series of Fiction, Fact and Fancy  
Illustration & Sketch, 518:33
- Potthoff, Willis J.  
Displaying One's Collection, 518:46-49
- Press, Steve  
True Friends, 531:58-71
- Randolph, Charles D., Col.  
Buffalo Bill, Hero of Dime Novels (Poem), 526:94
- Red Wolf Series  
Illustration & Sketch, 533:97  
List of Titles, 533:108
- Riehl, J. E.  
Charles Lamb's Forerunners of the Dime Novel, 532:109-110
- Riordan, Robert V.  
Half Century of the Hardy Boys; or, Clues to an Obscure Chronology, 530:34-47
- Rogers, Denis R.  
Aldine Life and Adventure Library, 533:97-108  
Early Publications of the Aldine Publishing Company, 532:82-88  
Ellis for Beginners, 529:2-20  
Lovell Complex, The, 527:98-115  
Oddities of Dime Novel Days, 526:85-88  
Survey of the Probably Publication Pattern of the Books by Edward S. Ellis Issued under the Imprints of A. L. Burt and the A. L. Burt Company, New York, 524:26-43
- Series of Military Novels  
Illustration & Sketch, 525:57
- Series of Sea Tales  
Illustration & Sketch. 531:57  
List of Titles, 531:75
- Skjelver, Mabel R.  
William Wallace Cook—The Marshall Years, 518:34-45
- Stratemeyer and Science Fiction, Part II, The Swifts, by John T. Dizer, Jr. 520:74-90
- Stratemeyer, Edward, 534:119-121
- Street & Smith Box M58, by John T. Dizer, Jr., 526:78-84
- Success and Failure. A Short History of English Penny Dreadful Publishers, by W. O. G. Lofts, 523:9-12
- Survey of the Probable Publication Pattern of the Books by Edward S. Ellis Issued under the Imprint of A. L. Burt and the A. L. Burt Company, New York, 524:26-43
- Swift, Tom, 520:74-90
- Tales of Celebrated Highwaymen  
Illustration & Sketch, 528:121  
List of Titles, 528:126
- True Friends, by Steve Press, 531:58-71
- William Wallace Cook—The Marshall Years, by Mabel R. Skjelver, 518:34-45
- Who Wrote the Pledge of Allegiance? By Louise Harris, 528:127-130



**RECENTLY PUBLISHED ARTICLES—DIME NOVELS, BOYS BOOKS**

**CELEBRITY COLLECTOR**, CAROLYN KEENE, A.K.A. HARRIET S. ADAMS, by Ralph D. Gardner, *Collectors Editions Quarterly*, January 1979, \$2.50. Ralph, author of "Horatio Alger; or, The American Hero Era," has written an excellent popular review of Stratemeyer and his works and the search being made by his daughter, Mrs. Harriet S. Adams, to complete a collection of his works. This is Mrs. Adams' second collection. The first collection was given to Wellesley College, her alma mater.

**BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF PRENTISS INGRAHAM** in "PRESIDENT'S COLUMN" of *THE REBEL YELL*, published by the Jackson Civil War Round Table, Inc., Jackson, Miss. Vol. 5, Series 16, January 1979. By James W. Thompson. A knowledgeable biographical sketch of Prentiss Ingraham and his dime novels.

**NEWS NOTES**

Jim Murray, columnist for the Los Angeles Times, compares Bart Starr, coach of the Green Bay Packers, with Frank Merriwell in his column of October 22, 1978. Another mention of Frank Merriwell was made by Thomas Boswell of the Washington Post, in his column of October 10, 1978. He compared Frank to Steve Garvey. It seems that Frank Merriwell is not dead after all. (Clippings sent in by Dave Soibelman)

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There was a net decrease of 2 during 1978, the first time in quite a few years that a decrease has been recorded. Four members died, Alfred A. Hupfeld, Walter E. Brown, Woodrow Gelman, Douglas R. Warner. 27 members dropped for various reasons. If anyone can convince any to once again become members, I would appreciate their help, Howard J. Fahrner, E. L. Meyer, Univ. of New York Library, Jim Tinsley, Wm. D. Gurtman, David L. Greene, Joseph Stoner, Robert E. Andrews, Horst K. Joost, Richard W. Clark, Paul Flayer, Lynn W. Gates, Mabel R. Skjelver, Timothy Mahoney, John Ehrman, Michael Solomon, John Gentilman, Harvey King, James A. Kraynick, Thomas J. Sweeney, Mrs. Colleen Urbanek, Richard F. Abrahamson, James Hashman, David N. Whittaker, Harvey Fell, Charlie Warden and Dennie White. 29 new members were enrolled beginning with No. 332 above.

#### RAILROAD READING

1. The Spectre Count of Fort Niagara and other stories, by Anna Belden.
2. Lady Lorne's Stratagem and other stories.
3. The Broken Hand and other stories.
4. Linda and other stories.



## Letters to the Editor

Dear Ed:

I enclose a couple of clippings which mention our old friend, Frank Merriwell, which shows that Jim Murray, the greatest sports columnist in the country, has not only a good recollection but also a fondness for the mythical marvelous man from Yale. The last time I sent him one of my gen-you-wine Merriwells he replied that he was being "overmerriwelled." He's a master of metaphor, among other literary skills.

I wrote a piece for the L. A. Times a couple of weeks ago on my theory that many youngsters can't or won't read because they haven't been exposed to the kind of stories we were when we were younger (the kind treated in your DNR); in other words they need heroes to admire and respect, whose adventures, etc., they can follow from week to week, to discuss, trade, sell, exchange, etc., with their friends, as we did. I don't know of a single hero, fictional or real, whose life is described in a book series. I'm sure if there were one such the kids would be delighted, read 'em, and eventually take on more serious reading. O, well . . .

—Dave Soibelman

Dear Ed:

The article in the Round-up on Nick Carter brought back some rather painful memories. When I was a kid I read Nick Carter on the sly. My mother didn't think they were the proper thing to read. And when she caught me at it I'd get a good spanking. I could read the Merriwells but not the Carter books. If I had been smart I should have used Merriwell covers on the Carters???

Russell L. Mowry

Dear Eddie,

The news is probably a little stale after all these years. But I notice that Gilbert Patten wrote at least one story for SNAPPY STORIES.

Recently ran across it in the September 20, 1924, issue.

Being almost totally uninformed about Mr. Patten, I don't know whether or not this is wide-spread knowledge. For those of the membership who have not had the misfortune to read this story, its more salient points are as follows:

"The Wild Rabbit," pp. 71-83. A mature woman, mad for pleasure, tells a retiring bank teller that his photograph shows him to be a wicked sensual man. He's spent a lifetime professing "aversion to swift young things in skirts who drank cocktails and smoked." At the dance, that night, he begins living up to the lady's opinion. He mashes the girls, pats their hands. Madened by success, he even kisses one—and when she slaps him, he laughs. Matters go so far that he murmurs sweetly in the ear of his friend's wife. But matters don't go that far. Not in SNAPPY STORIES, they don't. Eventually he meets the one he truly loves, only to feel that his behavior has lost her forever. Not so. With face flaming red, she proposes. Or perhaps he proposes. It isn't important. Anyway, his face is noble, and the story is over on a glad note, which is a relief.

Notice that several Street and Smith regulars, including C. S. Montanye and Vina Delmar appeared with Patten on the title page of this magazine. I suspect that several other names are also S&S authors, but have not checked.

Now, having made a tiny contribution—or maybe not—let me ask for a tiny bit of information. In the mid-1919 TOP NOTCH appeared a group of

stories about pro baseball player Slash Triebault. These were signed Burt L. Standish. Were these by Patten or was Standish being used as a house name. Same question for the 9/15-11/15, 1921 TOP NOTCH serial about the Camera Chap, "The Haunted Diamond." Signed by Standish. But was it Patten? Any help the membership can offer would be appreciated.

Bob Sampson

Dear Mr. LeBlanc:

I just wanted to let you know that I recently purchased a double deck of Congress playing cards with back designs of issue 441 (10-23-09) of Buffalo Bill Stories and issue 7 (10-20-05) of Frank Manley Weekly. I don't know if this was already generally known, nor do I know if there are any additional dime novel back designs. Congress is a branch of the United States Playing Card Company in Cincinnati, Ohio.

John McArdle

This is the first I've heard of these and I certainly will be on the lookout to buy a couple of decks.

---

### NEW MEMBERS

- 361 Rev. Paul J. Walther, 33 Mendham Road, Box 253, Gladstone, N. J. 07934
- 362 Gary M. McGrath, Box Ak, Steelville, Mo. 65565
- 363 F. C. McLean, Jr., 14000 Northwyn Dr., Silver Spring, Md. 20904
- 364 James W. Thompson, 4647 Kelton Drive, Jackson, Miss. 39211

### CHANGE OF ADDRESS

- 299 William B. Naughton, 12 Fulton St., Woburn, Mass. 01801
- 276 Charles S. Rogison, 4904 Old Lagrange Road, Crestwood, Ky. 40014
- 328 Linda Reed, 610 E. Winkler, Apt. G, Kermit, Texas 79745

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